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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001441

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL; NSC
FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Government and president headed for a
showdown, with a snap election possible

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS 08-05-02 telecon
- (B) Colombo 1433, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills.
Reasons: 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe are headed for a showdown. In an August 5 conversation with the Ambassador, G.L. Peiris, a senior minister, said the GSL plans to demand that Kumaratunga agree to a constitutional provision voiding her right to call a parliamentary election. If she does not agree, the GSL plans to call snap polls now. One factor that apparently precipitated the government's decision to force a showdown was its belief that Kumaratunga was about to hatch an elaborate plan to topple the PM. Our assessment is that an election would prove disruptive for the peace process. End Summary.

Headed for a Showdown

2. (C) As foreshadowed in Ref B, the tense cohabitation relationship between President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is headed for a showdown. In an August 5 conversation with the Ambassador, G.L. Peiris, a senior minister, said the GSL is planning to demand that Kumaratunga agree to a constitutional provision voiding her right to call a parliamentary election. (Note: Per her constitutional prerogatives, the president could call for a new election at any point one year after the last election, which took place in December 2001.) She must also agree not to take punitive action against MPs of her party who support the GSL's bill on this issue. If she does not agree to these terms, the GSL plans to call snap polls now. (Note: An election would take place about six weeks to two months after being called. The rough contours of Peiris' comments to the Ambassador regarding the possibility of snap polls were published in daily newspapers on August 6 in blaring headlines. End Note.)

3. (C) Peiris said the PM will present this ultimatum to former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, a key associate of Kumaratunga's, late August 6, and request that Kumaratunga reply in short order. In doing so, Peiris noted that the PM will stress that if she agrees to the above points he will instruct his United National Front (UNF) party members to tone down criticism of her and her People's Alliance (PA) party.

4. (C) The decision to press for a showdown was not easily taken, Peiris remarked. Key figures in the UNF government, including PM Wickremesinghe, had met late August 5 and come to the decision only after extensive debate, including frantic talks throughout the weekend. The general feeling from all shades of party opinion -- not only from diehard opponents of Kumaratunga's -- was that the UNF had to do something to constrain her now because the current situation was not sustainable. In particular, a memo purportedly prepared by the PA that was leaked to the press and published on August 4 had deeply worried the UNF, as it set out a near-term plan to topple Wickremesinghe's government (see more below).

5. (C) When asked, Peiris replied that he thought an election was "likely" and he predicted that the UNF could pick up 12-15 seats. Such a gain would give the UNF a commanding position in Parliament vis-a-vis the president, he felt. That said, it was possible that Kumaratunga might agree to the terms proffered or perhaps try to negotiate a different solution. Many members of her party did not want an election, fearing they would lose their seats. Their views might have an affect on her. The UNF would carefully review her response in any case. The Ambassador underscored that the U.S. continued to urge both sides to show restraint and not to divert focus from key issues, such as the peace process and economic reforms.

Purported PA Memo Stirs Debate

16. (C) As noted by Peiris and touched on in Ref B, one of the recent events that have apparently galvanized the GSL to action involves a memo allegedly drafted by the PA and then leaked to the press. The memo sets out a scheme in which the PA topples Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and then forms a government headed by former Foreign Minister Kadirgamar. The memo is somewhat lurid, with sentences like, "We must plan a constitutional coup using executive powers to the maximum..." and "A case must be built rapidly against the present PM facilitating his removal from office, enabling the president to appoint a PM of her choice."

17. (C/NF) The exact provenance of the memo is unclear. The UNF has been shouting from the ramparts that it is evidence of a "plot" by the PA and Peiris told the Ambassador that the document was "spirited away" from the desk of Mangala Sameeraweera, a senior PA MP. For its part, the PA has denied all involvement, with Kadirgamar stating that he knows not a wit about it and that his name was taken in vain.

Comment

18. (C) We doubt that Kumaratunga will react well to an ultimatum designed to limit her powers. The GSL seems serious, however, and a snap election appears to be a real possibility. There has been a slew of editorials urging the two sides to ratchet down the rhetoric and it is still possible that cooler heads will prevail. It's important that that happens. With Colombo fixated on its domestic machinations, little attention is being paid to crucial issues, such as the peace process and economic reforms. An election would prove even more disruptive, especially because the GSL is now closely engaged in the sensitive process of trying to set up negotiations with the Tigers later this year. End Comment.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS